DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 279 929 CG 019 738

AUTHOR Diedrick, Patricia
TITLE Gender Differences as Reflected in Family Stories.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (39th, Chicago, IL, November 19-23, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Family History; *Family Life; Higher Education; Information Sources; Kinship; Oral History; *Sex Differences; *Sex Role; *Story Telling; *Traditionalism

ABSTRACT

In past generations, traditional gender roles may have dominated family life. One method of investigating the relationship of gender roles and their impact on subsequent generations is to use the relating of family stories to obtain quantitative data. A study was conducted to examine gender role information and gender differences in the passing along of family history and the relating of familial information. College students (N=56) asked their same-sex parent and grandparent to trace their families and to relate stories of family members, along with the source of these stories. A total of 169 stories from 56 families were analyzed in regard to main characters and themes reported, social desirability, and common or unusual events. Gender of hero, and of the teller of the story, as well as gender of the source of the story were included. The analysis indicated that information concerning family members of past generations clearly reflected traditional values concerning gender roles, and were generally told to current members by females, as the keepers of family history. It was concluded that the collection of family stories may yield information concerning family history and may serve as a method of investigation useful in understanding various aspects of, and influences upon, family life. (NB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED279929

Gender Differences As Reflected in Family Stories

Patricia Diedrick
University of Georgia

Peter Martin
University of Georgia

Gunhild Hagestad
The Pennsylvania State University

CG 019738

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Patricia Diedrick
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

In the past generations, traditional gender roles may well have dominated family life. One method of investigating the relationship of gender roles and its impact on subsequent generations is to use the relating of family stories to obtain quantitative data. The purpose of this study was to investigate gender role information, and gender differences in (a) the passing along of family history and (b) the relating of familial information. A total of 169 stories as reported by 56 families indicated that information concerning family members of past generations clearly reflect traditional values concerning gender roles, and are generally told to current members by females, as the "keepers" of family history. It was concluded that the collection of family stories may yield information concerning family history, and serve as a method of investigation useful in understanding various aspects of, and influences upon, family life.

Gender Differences As Reflected In Family Stories

Family stories may provide information for researchers on various aspects of family life in the past, and the influence of the experience of past generations upon present generations. Such stories can help trace back various aspects of family life, the effects of historical ("macro") experiences and salient family "themes". The purpose of this study was to investigate the application of family stories as a research tool, and assess it's application to the study of gender roles in relation to family life in the past.

Although life event research has become popular and productive over the last 20 years (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Datan & Ginsberg, 1975), such research has been primarily limited to events of the recent past. Family experiences extracted from genealogical stories can help determine which life events remain as "family inheritance" and how long such stories last.

The study of family stories also relates to research on narratives, life histories, and biographical research. Several authors have argued that the remembered past is a good source of data for research on the life cycle (Lieberman & Falk, 1971; Runyan, 1982). In a related area, White (1972) and Allport (1961) have both suggested that the study of personality is best represented through a life history. But family stories help bring out which aspects of life histories remain as "family treasures".

The use of family stories as a research tool can be useful

within a variety of contexts. One such area is the investigation of socialization processes. Stories about one's grandparents, for example, may serve as reminders of proper behaviors, and as descriptions of rewards for such proper behaviors. Stories may also serve as examples of inappropriate behaviors, thus existing as warnings against improper activities. Family pride, or shame, may become important areas of investigation in connection with such stories.

Traditional gender roles of the past certainly impacted upon family systems. Through an investigation of family stories information concerning such gender roles and their impact upon family functioning can be traced.

Traditionally, the male gender role has involved holding full-time careers to support families, whereas the female gender role has involved primarily caregiving activities (Knox, 1985). It has been noted that both sexes come to define themselves, and the sexes in generally, in gender appropriate ways, with males described as self-reliant and strong, and females as nuturant and emotional (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972). Although, as pointed out by Knox, some disagreement exists as to whether gender differences may relate to the effects of nature or nuture, general agreement exists that socialization processes do have great impact upon gender roles. Family stories relating to gender role behaviors of past relatives may in part serve to socialize the young as to appropriate roles, or to warn the young against certain curiosities (i.e., inappropriate behaviors).

As pointed out by Williams (1977) departures from gender roles in the past were considered curiosities. It is possible, however, that one generation's curiosity may serve as another generation's role model. It was hypothesized that family stories would reflect traditional values, with males described more in terms of work activities, females more in terms of caregiving activities.

Method

57 students of a family development class in Pennsylvania served as investigators in interviewing their same-sex parent and grandparent. Respondents were asked to trace back their families and to relate stories of family members, along with the source of these stories.

The stories were analyzed in regard to main characters and themes reported, social desirability, and common or unusual events. Gender of hero, and of the teller of the story, as well as gender of the source of the story were included. Themes such as caregiving, work activities, personality descriptions, health descriptions and education experiences, were noted.

Results

Altogether 169 stories were reported by the 56 families. There was no relationship between sex of story teller and sex of hero of the story ($r=.03$). But there were clear gender differences in the descriptions of the heros, and in the source of the stories. Mothers represented the major portion of the source of stories, suggesting that women serve as the family keepers, so to speak (see Table 1). But the stories were most

often about grandfathers, next often about either grandmothers or uncles (see Table 2).

Male heros were more often described in terms of their work, personality, and general activities, than were female heros. Females, on the other hand, were more often described in terms of a general family theme, in terms of caregiving, and in terms of education and religion (see Table 3).

Discussion

That females were typically described in terms of general family-oriented themes such as caregiving, and males in terms of active participation such as work-related activities, suggests that traditional gender roles have been regarded as salient features of family life. Further, education, for females, was an unusual accomplishment in the past, and thus was probably recalled due to its degree of unusualness.

The finding that males were more often described in relation to work settings, and females in relation to family settings, is in line with past research (Hagestad, 1984; Lehr, 1976). But as Lehr pointed out in her own research, many stories related to unique individual occurrences, and thus some stories about women who never married, or who worked or were well educated, involved the unusual aspect of such roles in terms of the historical settings. Such stories represent the curiosities described by Williams (1977), as instances of unusual (and often unacceptable) gender role behaviors.

Stories with male heroes were more often oriented towards activites than were those stories with female heroes, and this

likely relates to expected gender role activities. Females, as caregivers, may be more likely pictured as sedate, whereas males, as associated with work roles, may be more likely to be noted in active roles. Traditional stereotyping, as well, involves males being seen as more active.

The study of family (genealogical) stories gives indications of generational relationships, the salience of life experiences in families, and information concerning such aspects of life as gender role differences in relation to the family. This preliminary study was a first attempt to investigate such issues in reference to family stories, and results indicate that such a method can add to our understanding of families.

Future research possibilities, using family stories as a tool, are vast. Socialization processes, the effects of stories upon family behaviors and expectations, and changes in roles over time may be areas of future research. It is suggested that an important aspect of such future research would be the inclusion of analysis, but the respondent, as to whether the story represented a socially, and personally, desirable event. Generations may be investigated to determine whether a story changes not only over time, but in response to the individual's interpretation of such aspects as social desirability. One generation s shame may well become another generation's pride. Further, an investigation of the possible changing nature of pride and shame over time, and in response to sociological events, would help us understand better the impact of the macro environment upon the family and their understanding and

interpretation of past events.

References

Allport, G. W. (1961). Pattern and growth in personality. New York: Holy, Rinehart & Winston.

Broverman, I. K., Vogel, S. R., Broverman, D. M. Clarkson, F. E., & Rosenkrantz, P. S. (1972). Sex role stereotypes: A current appraisal. Journal of Social Issues, 28, 59-78

Datan, N. & Ginsberg, L. H. (1975) Life-span developmental psychology: Normative life crises. New York: Academic Press.

Dohrenwend, B. S. & Dohrenwend, B. P. (Eds.) (1974). Stressful life events. Their nature and effects. New York: Wiley.

Hagestad, G. H. (1984). The continuous bond: A dynamic multigenerational perspective on parent-child relations between adults. Paper prepared for the Minnesota Symposium on Child Psychology, Vol. 17, Lawrence Earlbaum Associates.

Knox, D. (1985). Choices in relationships: An introduction to marriage and the family. St. Paul: West.

Lehr, U. (1976). Zur Frage der Gliederung des menschlichen Lebenslaufes. Aktuelle Gerontologie, 6, 337-345.

Liberman, M.A. & Falk, J.M. (1971). The remembered past as a source of data for research on the life cycle. Human Development, 14, 132-141.

Runyan, W. M. (1982). Life histories and psychobiology. New York: Oxford University Press.

White, R. W. (1972) The enterprise of living. New York:

Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Williams, J. H. (1977). Psychology of women: Behavior in a biosocial context. New York: Norton.

Table 1

Source of Stories

		%
1	Mothers	33.5
2	Fathers	21.8
3	Both parents	8.8
4	No information	8.2
5	Self	7.1
6	Grandmother	6.5
7	Grandfather	3.5
8	Aunt	7.9
8	Many people	2.9
10	Uncle	1.8
11	Sibling	1.2
12	First cousin	1.0
12	Second counsin	1.0
12	Niece	1.0

Table 2

Main Characters in Family Stories

		Frequency	Percent
1.	Grandfather	34	22 7%
2.	Grandmother	27	18.0%
3.	Uncle	27	18.0%
4.	Aunt	23	15.3%
5.	Great grandfather	12	8.0%
6.	Mother	5	3.3%
7.	Father	5	3.3%
8.	Sibling	4	2.7%
9.	Great grandmother	4	2.7%
10.	Second cousin	2	1.3%
11.	Great great grandfather	2	1.3%
12.	First cousin	1	0.7%
13.	Stepmother	1	0.7%
14.	Stepfather	1	0.7%
15.	Great great grandmother	1	0.7%
16.	Great great great grandparents	1	0.7%
Total		150	100.0%

Table 3

Themes in Family Stories

Story themes	Total percent	Male heroes[1]	Female heroes	Male/ Female
Personality description	23.0%	60.0%	35.0%	5%
Work	22.0%	74.0%	18.0%	8%
Family	16.2%	28.0%	60.0%	12%
Death and dying	13.3%	47.0%	39.0%	14%
Activities	11.0%	47.0%	21.0%	32%
Caregiving	5.2%	22.0%	78.0%	0%
Health	3.5%	33.0%	50.0%	12%
Education	2.3%	25.0%	75.0%	0%
Religion	2.3%	0.0%	75.0%	25%
Adventure	1.2%	100.0%	0.0%	0%

[1]Percentage relate to each reported story theme, as divided by male and female heroes.